

[The Last Diggings]

Oregon Folklore Studies

American Folk Stuff

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THE LAST DIGGINGS

By Walker Winslow

It has long been proverbial in Oregon, as elsewhere in the West, that a majority of gold prospectors and miners end up without the gold they spend their lives seeking. Of the few who are materially rewarded, only a small percentage keep their gain. As a consequence, most miners spend their last years in limited circumstances. They are not wholly defeated, however; orally they live the good years over again, narrating their life stories in a style that is robust, racy, and picturesque. The following is a living example.

I

When I talk I am liable to do some tall running off at the mouth. I am a long distance talker and for all I know I may take you for a long ride in the wrong direction. I am a miner and for forty-fifty years I have been tunneling a shaft straight into this poor-house. You can't call that very good mining. Most miners is fools and I'll bet you that for every dollar lifted off the bedrock in this country two was put back on it. Miners is liars too [md] honest liars. If you question a miner's word about his claim you might as well question his daughter's virtue. That's the way they stand by their lies. I have lied some tall ones in my day, and struck millions in this old head that no man will ever see or take to the mint. That's how I got where I am [md]by being a lying fool. I don't take it you are religious, so I'll go further

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2 and say that miners is damned fools, and that I have been one of the worst. I'll tell you about some of my special kinds of foolishness.

II.

I am a hard rock man and I learned my business at Kermit, California, up in the Feather River country. That was a big diggings and some of the best of the old hands was there. I learned the business from the ground down. You don't learn from the ground up in my business. I could timber and cut my own steel before I was twenty-five. We didn't have none of them hardware store drills in them days. The boss man handed you a bar of steel and said, "Cut 'er up." You couldn't come no kicks about your drill unless you wanted to kick yourself. To be a timber man you had to be a first-rate rough carpenter, and like as not you had to fell your own timber right on the ground. A man had to know his business and a foreman could tell a greenhorn like reading beef from a poor ox, and you didn't ask the foreman how to do anything. He'd just say, "Go ahead, and if it don't suit me I'll let you know." No one ever got fired in them days. All you had to do was criticise a man and he quit. There was none of this sucking around like you have now, and a man didn't hang onto his job like a priest to a parish. Every once in a while we just drug down our pay on principle, and went down the road to a new job. They'd call us hoboes now, I guess. But in them days we was known as Overland Johns, and by god, I knew every creek and cow between here and Mexico, and right back up to Alaska. You see what it has got me. But in them days if you were a mining man there wasn't any other way around. People didn't like the homeguard, and if you stayed in one place very long that is just what you got to be. If a man kept moving he had to keep on his toes, and that made good mechanics of us old timers. People hired the drifters.

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I'll give you an example of how we got our jobs, and this wasn't long ago, either. I drifted into [Corniopia?] one night on the late stage [md] just out shaking the small of Portland off myself [md] and I dropped into a small blind pig to wars myself a little. I'm not much of

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a drinking man, but the bartender there could see that I was an old Overlander, and he was an old timer himself. He grinned at the sight of me. We didn't have much to say, but when I got up to leave for the hotel he calls me and says, "Looking for a place, old timer?" I told him that he pretty near had the idea. "Well," he says, "you go see so and so in the morning. He wants a man." Then he asked me my name, and I told him and went on to bed. The next morning I went around to see the guy he told me about, and he asked me a hell of a lot more questions than he had any business asking about, where I had been and who I'd worked for. I told him as much as I thought he ought to know. I could see that the job was in highgrade and that he wanted to know just who he was hiring. He was just about to paint my check for me [md] tall me it was no go [md] when here comes the bartender and he says, "Say, to and so, ain't you hiring this man. This is Hank Simms. He don't amount to nothing and never will, but he is a hard rock man from way back, and so tight in his mining it would take a ten pound sledge to drive a drill in him, and so honest it would take a pinch bar to pull it out." "You're hired," says so and so to me. Well, I handled some of the steepest highgrade you ever did see for that man. I have seen the time when we pulled down a stand of it that would run 600 ounces of silver to the ton, and maybe 300 gold, and I don't think that the man ever watched me. He trusted me and that highgrade was the kind you carry in canvas, so none of it will leak out. That bartender's word was better with him than a deacon's.

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Highgrade ore is the kind that is rich enough to steal the way it is, and the men who steal it are known as highgraders. There are other highgraders too, such as the companion that buy property and skin off the cream, and then sell out to some sucker for a lot more than there is left. But the kind I am talking about here is the kind that steals ore and peddles it. A man could be honest as hell until he saw a clump of highgrade, and then all his principles would leave him. I had a Swede working with me that just couldn't leave highgrade alone. He was an honest man up to a certain point, but with that ore there was too much of a strain on it for him to stand up under. The shaft ran back into the mountain

and this highgrade clumped out every so often. The way you do with that stuff is leave it hanging so the boss can watch it. He can measure a bunch of it that way and there is no running off with it. One day we ran around a hanging of extra-rich stuff and finished cleaning up around it just at quitting time. I went out of the shaft and left the Swede standing there looking at the highgrade, and then pretty soon I heard a crash. He couldn't stand it any longer and he had knocked it down. We went on down to the bunk-house together, and an hour later along came the foreman, and he says, "[Ole?], I am going to have to lay you off [md] you are a good miner, but I got to let someone go and it might as well be you. I'm going down the hill tonight, and I want you for company." You couldn't leave the Swede and that loose highgrade in the same county, and the super knew it. He didn't blame the Swede and he walked clear to town with him to keep him honest. Now I've been too damned honest. People used to call me Honest Hank Simms. They ought to have said, "There goes Honest Hank Simms an his way to the poor-house."

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You would think that mining your life away was enough of a gamble, but no. A miner wouldn't have it that way. He had to buck the tiger and sweat out hole cards right along with his other prospecting. Sometimes they'd hit but not very often. I [?] one poor galoot of a Cousin Jack [md] that's a Cornishman [md] came into one place with not enough clothes on him to flag a handcar. He walked up to the wheel and put his last dollar on the double O [md] he was drunk, and it pays 86 to one [md] and damn me if he didn't hit the pay-dirt. It wasn't a very big joint and the limit would have been ten dollars under ordinary circumstances, but Cousin Jack was drunk and the dealer know that there wasn't no double O's coming up twice in a row, and so he says, "Leave her lay, Jack." He did, and by damn here comes the old double O again. The house only had eighteen hundred dollars, and he took it all. In three days I saw Cousin Jack, and all he had was the jimmies and no breakfast. The next time I saw him he was bull cook in a Mormon camp [md] happy as hell; said that as soon as he made a stake he was going out prospecting. A real miner never goes prospecting until he has to earn his grub-stake the hard way. He'd no more take

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money be made mining or gambling and do that than a priest would shave with Holy water. I was a little different, but you see where it got me. I mined right up until a year or two ago, and I quit my last job because I was too cold [md] not too old. It was up in Canada, and you could pitch a biscuit out the cook-house door onto a glacier.

VI.

Every time I start to get wise you want to point out to me where I am [md] in the poorhouse. I don't know that it proves much, though, I'll tell 6 you the story of a model man [md] you know the kind: he never drank nor gambled. He went to church on Sunday, prayed when I would have sworn, and followed the teachings of Jerusalem Slim to a T. Good man, it was just his way. I had a Catholic foreman tell me once, "Simms, when I am up on top of the ground the Pope can tell me what to do, but when we are down in it your word is as good as his." (The foreman's name was Doyle [md] an Irishman and a damned good mining man). Well, this model man worked a claim next to mine, down in Southern Oregon, way back, say, forty years ago. He worked it hard, prayed like hell, and when the diggings was about to break up he sold out for a thousand dollars. The rest of us stayed on until a Chinaman couldn't have panned out a grain of rice in a day. I figured that this model man would amount to something. But when I last heard of him he was doing his mining on the side, like it should be done, and farming and raising a family. When I came in here to live I was sitting down in the hall one day, and there was an old codger sitting next to me and we get to talking. Said he was from Southern Oregon, so I got to playing the names of people I knew at him, and he come back at me. We went on seeing who could stir up the most live ones. Finally I played the model man at him. I says, "Have you ever heard what happened to Cliff Prine? He must be a deacon by now, and rich." Well, I was talking to the model man. He has a room here. If you want to go see him he'll show you the other side of the ledge.

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I guess that if a man has miner's blood in him, he can't never make it on top the ground. He's like a mole; he can tell his way around by the kind of rock he's in, but the wind don't make sense.

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Walker Winslow Date November 29, 1938,

Address 2069 [St.] Park, Portland, Oregon.

Subject Hardrock Mining.

Name and address of informant Hank Simms, Odd Fellows' Home. SE 32nd & Holgate St., Portland, Oregon.

Date and time of interview Nov. 29, 1938. From 10 in the morning until 2 PM.

Place of interview Mr. Simms' room at the Odd Fellows Home.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

Howard Corning, 400 Elks Bldg.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you none.

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Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. The Odd Fellows' home for old people occupies large grounds and consists of two well-kept brick buildings, of four or five stories each. I was shown around the institution by the Superintendent and the entire establishment in clean, modern, and nicely furnished. Each of the residents has a private room and it was in Hank Simms' room that I conducted the interview. The furnishings of this room were two chairs, a bed, and a chest of drawers. There were no pictures on the walls and but a few of Mr. Simms' belongings on the dresser. Everything was very orderly and it was evident that Hank Simms doesn't belong to that school of elders who go in for exotic interior decoration. In spite of the comparative bareness of the room, one felt at home.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Walker Wislow Date November 29, 1938.

Address 2069 St. Park, Portland, Oregon

Subject Folklore (Mining)

Name and address of informant Hank Simms, Odd Fellows' Home, 32nd & Holgate, Portland, Oregon.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

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1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupation and accomplishments with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other points gained in interview

(1). Mr. Hank Simms is an old type of westerner and resents having his family affairs pried into. He does, however, in the course of ordinary conversation, reveal many of the answers necessary to the above questions. His father, Henry Hutton Simms, was born in Illinois in 1823, and came West in the gold rush of 'forty-nine. Later he took up a donation claim two miles north of the (2) town of [Willemina?], and it was there Hank Simms was born in the year of 1852 (3). About the rest of his family and his early years on the homestead. Mr. Simms was uncommunicative and wanted to get on to talk of mining, in which I had told him I was interested. Question four (4) is answered by Mr. Simms' claim that he has lived in practically every mining town from Alaska to Mexico. (5) is as yet unanswered, but Simms is a remarkably literate man.

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Mr. Simms is a miner and has worked in every type of metal but tungston, and at every position in the mines from laborer to superintendent. (7) Mr. Simms' special skills and interests are those connected with mining [md] geology, etc. (8) Mr. Simms is an atheist and / from his present residence it can be assumed that he was an Odd Fellow (9). At 86, Hank Simms has the appearance of a man twenty years younger, and his only infirmity seems to be a little weakness in the legs. He is a tall and somewhat handsome man, clean-shaven, with clear eyes and a steady countenance that at times wears an ironic sort of smile. When he loads his pipe you notice, with surprise, that his hands are steady and from the clearness of his voice and the delivery of his speech, you have a hard time bringing yourself to believe in his age. He has all of his own teeth and though they are worn they seem strong and grip his pipe with some determination. His weight is about one hundred and ninety, and he is still a powerful man and one whose body has not been broken by labor, but built by it. The hearing is good and, except for minor lapses there seems to be no flaw in his memory. (10) One of the significant things about the man is his honesty about his present position, and he says that he cannot see why a person who was unsuccessful enough to end up in a home for the aged should be of interest to anybody, or why anything he could say should seem important. It would be the impression of this interviewer that Mr. Simms is an extremely reliable source of information; he is remarkably free from any biases that might color the picture of the past. Since he harbors no bitterness, his remarks on others can be given some validity. When a person still living might be hurt by anything he has to say, he refuses to give the proper name. Hank Simms is the finest type of old western man.